

Has ‘Modernity’ Shown All Arguments for the Existence of God to be Wrong?

Daniel von Wachter*

[This is a preprint version of: Wachter, Daniel von, 2016, ‘Has “Modernity” Shown All Arguments for the Existence of God to be Wrong?’, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 10, 257–261.]

[Review of: Buchheim, Thomas & Hermanni, Friedrich & Hutter, Axel & Schwöbel, Christoph, *Gottesbeweise als Herausforderung für die moderne Vernunft [Proofs for the Existence of God as a Challenge to Modern Reason]*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012, pp. 630.]

Many German philosophers and theologians are impressed by Kant’s claim that arguments for the existence of God are impossible or by the idea that ‘modernity’ makes arguments for the existence of God ‘problematic’. The title of this collection, *Proofs for the Existence of God as a Challenge to Modern Reason* reflects this. Though this collection starts from the idea that proofs for the existence of God are ‘problematic’, it also challenges it.

*International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality of Liechtenstein, <http://von-wachter.de>, email: epostATvon-wachter.de.

The collection is based on a conference in 2011 and presents 17 German articles (by Robert Spaemann, Rolf Schönberger, Jens Halfwassen, Markus Gabriel, Thomas Buchheim, Axel Hutter, Gunnar Hindrichs, Markus Enders, Friedrich Hermann, Armin Kreiner, Svend Andersen, Anton Friedrich Koch, Friederike Schick, Christian Illies, Christoph Schwöbel, Friedo Ricken, and Matthias Lutz-Bachmann) and three English articles (by Peter van Inwagen, Richard Swinburne, and John Leslie) about arguments for the existence of God.

Although, in my view, the term ‘analytic’ is often confusing, it is informative to say that the German articles in this collection are in some sense non-analytic. Let me try to describe their style. Some of the articles differ from usual Anglo-American philosophy articles just in that they address a rather broad question or a range of questions and in that they interact much with historical authors, in particular with Hegel, Kant, Leibniz, and Thomas Aquinas. But they do defend a philosophical thesis or at least comment on the authors they interact with. Other articles defend no philosophical thesis but only present the view of a historical author or compare several authors. But these latter articles are not strictly exegetical either. They do not investigate in detail how a particular text is to be interpreted. Rather, they look for general characteristics of certain authors or for lines of development of ideas. They paint a landscape of ideas or write a drama in which they let historical authors interact with each other. For these authors, this is one way of doing philosophy and perhaps the only way they think philosophy is ‘possible today’. They ‘reflect’ on authors or ideas, instead of, as Anglo-American philosophers would do it, straight away defending a philosophical thesis.

About half of the German articles in this collection are purely or primarily historical in this way. For example, Friedo Ricken presents Kant’s moral argument for the existence of God, Friederike

Schick describes Leibniz's and Samuel Clarke's cosmological arguments, and Rolf Schönberger presents a text by Meister Eckhart. Jens Halfwassen reflects on the ontological argument, with references to Hegel, Meister Eckhart and Plato. One of his questions is: 'If the absolute is conceived of as *existing*, is it then still conceived of as *the absolute*? And if we conceive of the absolute, following Meister Eckhart, as being itself or, following Hegel, as the absolute idea and the absolute spirit, are we then still conceiving of *the absolute*?' Markus Gabriel, in his German article 'Is the concept of God of the ontological argument consistent?', brings Anselm, Leibniz, and Hegel into dialogue with each other.

Let me turn to some of the articles with a more specific thesis. Thomas Buchheim brings to our attention that often, especially where Kant is admired, the term 'proof of the existence of God' (Gottesbeweis) is understood as implying that a proof removes all doubt and stops all conjecturing. In German, that term is being used more often than the term 'argument for the existence of God', which does not imply this absolute certainty. In my view, the very high standard of 'proof', which requires that it is shown 'once and for all' that there is a God, is one of the main reasons for the widespread scepticism towards arguments for the existence of God. Buchheim gives four reasons for doubting the possibility of proving God's existence in this sense: 1. There is no sufficiently clear concept of God; 2. God is relevant for our life; 3. we are not impartial; 4. it is supposed that the world is independent and God is transcendent.

Also Armin Kreiner, who in his article raises objections against cosmological arguments, has in mind deductive arguments which produce absolute certainty. He just claims that the cosmological argument is not cogent and leaves open whether there are successful inductive, probabilistic cosmological arguments. One criticism I have about this collection is that the articles contained pay too much attention to the idea of deductive arguments which

make the existence of God absolutely certain. In my view, this requirement was usually demanded only by opponents of theistic arguments, and today, since Richard Swinburne's *The Existence of God* in 1979, such a notion of proof plays no role in the debate about theism. Instead, the theistic and atheistic arguments put forward today are almost without exception probabilistic, cumulative, and inductive. Even those arguments that are presented as deductive arguments, for example William Lane Craig's kalam cosmological argument, do not claim to be conclusive or to produce absolute certainty, but they are probabilistic in that they cumulate as much evidence and support for the premises as they can.

Friedrich Hermann, in a particularly focussed and thoughtful article, defends the cosmological as well as the ontological argument. Christian Illich argues carefully for the thesis that the theory of evolution is compatible with theism. Richard Swinburne puts forward detailed arguments against Hume's and Kant's objections against theistic arguments. John Leslie spells out and defends a Platonic view of God according to which God is the good and the good is creative. Peter van Inwagen distinguishes three kinds of ontological arguments.

Fideistic positions, as they are rarely found in Anglo-American philosophy, are expressed in the articles by Gunnar Hindrichs and Christoph Schwöbel. Hindrichs thinks that there is something obsessive about arguments for the existence of God: 'Instead of simply believing in God, some want their beliefs to be true. For this, they show themselves and the others that God really exists.' (181) I would reply that, yes, I want my beliefs to be true. Especially, I want the true belief about the existence of God, because it is bad in itself to be wrong about the ultimate cause, because I want to find the meaning of life, and because if there is a God I want to worship him, evangelise, and do what he wants me to do, while if there is no God, then there are better

ways to spend my time.

Schwöbel's article of 58 pages about the Christian belief in creation starts from the thesis that Christian faith is not a human work and that therefore, although its content can be spelled out rationally, it cannot be defended rationally. Instead of the term 'Christian doctrine of creation' (Schöpfungslehre) Schwöbel uses the term 'christlicher Schöpfungsglaube' (492), which means Christian belief or faith in creation. This is a matter of faith, therefore it is not a human work, therefore no arguments for it can be given. This pure fideism is illustrated also in Schwöbel's five characteristics of 'fundamentalism', which, according to Schwöbel, gave rise to 'creationism' (p. 489): 1. Fundamentalism is a modern phenomenon, the doctrine of creationism has not existed before in the history of Christianity. 2. Fundamentalists take those claims to be fundamental which are most strongly criticised by the opponents. 3. Fundamentalists, and especially creationists, try to beat the enemies with their weapons when they try to point out weaknesses and errors in the theory of evolution. 4. Fundamentalists transform the Christian faith into a world view. 'This becomes apparent most of all in that fundamentalism – like its opponent, i.e. scientism or atheistic evolutionism – tries to win consent through arguments and proofs. [...] [By contrast,] according to the Christian view, faith is constituted by the Holy Spirit making the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ evident to the person. Faith therefore is God's work in us and is created where and when it pleases God. For fundamentalism [by contrast], faith consists in the acceptance of statements on the basis of proofs and arguments.' (490) 5. 'Typical for fundamentalism is an antagonistic dualism between followers and opponents which does not allow for intermediate positions.' (491) The intermediate position which Schwöbel has in mind here seems to be theistic evolution, which is probably his own position.

Regarding (1), I think that Schwöbel must understand 'cre-

ationism' in a special way because obviously in general Christian philosophers and theologians in the past believed that God created some animals directly, i. e. he intervened in order to create, and some believed that he did so in six days. But I did not find such a definition in the article. Concerning (4), I would first point out that besides Schwöbel's view of faith and the view that 'faith consists in the acceptance of statements on the basis of proofs and arguments', there is another alternative: Accepting certain doctrines is a part of, and necessary for, faith, but in addition faith involves certain actions and attitudes: repentance, conversion, praying, asking God for forgiveness through Christ, and commitment to God.

When Schwöbel says that someone's belief that God created the universe is produced by God directly but it is possible to 'explicate' the content of faith rationally (493), that could mean that it is a matter of scientific and philosophical investigation *how* God created, e. g. whether it involved interventions and which ones. Schwöbel seems to confirm that when he says that integrating Darwin's theory of evolution into 'the Christian theology of creation' is an 'explication of the faith in creation' (496). But in the fourth characteristic of fundamentalism, he criticises 'fundamentalists' for defending their view through arguments, instead of just saying that the Holy Spirit makes the truth evident to the person. In order to make his view coherent, Schwöbel should give up his rejection of what he describes as characteristics of fundamentalists in (3) and (4). Trying to point out weaknesses and errors in the opponent's theory and trying to win consent through arguments and proofs is an essential mark of rationality and science. However, it is honourable that Schwöbel, as a endorser of theistic evolution, instead of suggesting that fundamentalists and creationists are dogmatic and do not use reason, admits that creationists try to point out weaknesses in the theory of evolution and try to win consent through arguments and

proofs.

I conclude that this collection offers research and reflections about arguments for the existence of God from contemporary German non-analytic philosophy and theology and that it contains valuable research and insights. One criticism I have is that the German articles hardly interact with the contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of religion. Although one could reply that also Anglo-American authors do not interact with these German authors, I think that given the amount and the quality of research on arguments for the existence of God that was produced in Anglo-American philosophy during the last forty years, more interaction would have been desirable. I hope that the trend in German philosophy and theology to question the old prejudices about arguments for the existence of God will continue to grow and that German philosophers and theologians will produce many strong arguments for or against the existence of God.